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DID "ASTROPHEL" LOVE "STELLA"

In 1591, the sonnet-sequence by Sir Philip Sidney, entitled "Astrophel and Stella," was produced surreptitiously by the publisher, Thomas Newman. Of the numerous interesting questions concerning these ostensible love-sonnets, the one I wish here to raise—or raise again, for it is an old one—is the question of their personal sincerity. Did "Astrophel" love "Stella"?

In general, I am not partial to this type of literary question. There is much in Browning's contention that the poet's self, his "house of life," is his castle, not penetrable by right or power of any gossip-mongering critic. To that class he replies scornfully, "You can't get in anyway"!

whoso desires to penetrate
Deeper, must dive by the spirit-sense—
No optics like yours, at any rate!

But it is hard for an ordinary human being not to ask after any story, "Is it really true?" And the world at large is credulous, inclining to take people—even poets—at their word. Heine certainly gave a most undeserved compliment, when he said—

Diese Welt glaubt nicht an Flammen,
Und sie nimmt's für Poesie.

On the contrary, the world—at least the biographers, critics, and schoolgirls—dubious about *Poesie*, has calmly taken it all for *Flammen*, forgetting old Giles Fletcher's prudent consideration that "a man may write of love and not be in love; as well as of husbandry and not go to the plough; or of witches and be none; or of holiness and be flat profane."¹ Are we to believe Sidney, or not, when he protests—

know! that I, in pure simplicity,
Breathe out the flames which burn within my heart,
Love only reading unto me this art. —xxviii.

¹ Licia (1593), Epist. Ded.

Are we to believe Dante, or not, when he protests so similarly—

Io mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, ed a quel modo
Che detta dentro, vo significando. — *Purg.*, xxiv, 52–54.

Certainly, what each says is *Poesie*; but is it *Flammen*? While there is imagination, there is doubt. Coleridge may be right; a poet may be a poet just because he can compel us—nay, fool us—into “a willing suspension of disbelief” in his sincerity. A feigned artlessness, the profession of “pure simplicity,” so far from reassuring, should give pause. Bret Harte’s Heathen Chinee was most artless and simple.

So, if “pure simplicity” is a device within the capacity of the most ordinary actor, to convey the illusion of an overmastering passion is the triumph of a great artist. No one would deny this proposition in the abstract; yet how many critics have spun out heated arguments upon an implied denial! Listen to Swinburne defending the “sincerity” of Shakspeare’s Sonnets; or to cooler-headed Jusserand answering, only yesterday, my own titular question: “Like most of the poets of his time, Sidney *could* draw love songs from his imagination; he has strewn his prose ‘Arcadia’ with such. No one can read them without noticing the difference, and without concluding that, in truth, Astrophel loved Stella” (*Lit. Hist. Eng. People*, II [1906], 396, 397). By the same token, if poetic quality be the test of literal reality, then Juliet’s love must be the reality, and Shakspeare’s own “Will” sonnets to the Dark Lady the fiction, “for no one can read them without noticing the difference, and without concluding that in truth,” Juliet really lived and loved Romeo, and Shakspeare—after such bad and plagiaristic puns—could never have loved the Dark Lady!

Another up-to-date critic, Mr. Sidney Lee, reads Sidney’s sonnets, and concludes quite differently from M. Jusserand.

Although it is probable [he writes (*Eliz. Sonnets*, Introd. xliii)] that Sidney’s pursuit of the favour of Lady Rich, a coquettish friend of his youth who married another, led him to turn sonneteer, the imitative quality that . . . is visible throughout Sidney’s ample effort, . . . destroys most of those specious pretensions to autobiographic confessions which the unwary reader may discern in them.

But, one may ask, does the "imitative quality" of Milton's tender sonnet to his dead wife—following as it does in its conception a similar sonnet by Bernardino Rota ("In lieto, e pien di reverenzia aspetto")—make its autobiographic pretensions specious? or, more broadly, may not a man go a-wooing or a-mourning as well in a borrowed song as in a borrowed suit?

Thus from internal evidence, these two representative critics—and I take them simply as representative—deduce opposite, and as I believe unnecessary, conclusions from the same premises. External evidence likewise reads double to them.

Sidney's poetic worship of Stella [comments Mr. Lee (*loc. cit.*)] became a conventional theme in Elizabethan poetry, and enjoyed a popularity only second to that of Petrarch's poetic worship of Laura. The *locus classicus* for its treatment is the collection of elegies, entitled *Astrophel*, to which Spenser was the chief contributor. That volume was dedicated to Sidney's widow, and his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, wrote a poem for it. Throughout the work, Sidney's celebration of Stella is accounted his most glorious achievement in literature. The dedication of *Astrophel* to Sidney's wife deprives of serious autobiographical significance his description in the sonnets of his pursuit of Stella's affections.

So Mr. Lee; now M. Jusserand:

Sidney's sonnets came out after his death; and the world knew then how deep had been the passion that "Astrophel" had felt for "Stella." And Stella, to the inconvenience of a very modern school of critics, according to whom Sidney had described imaginary loves, the true Stella, Penelope Devereux, Lady Rich, in spite of her faults, more and more visible, in spite of her far from exemplary life, remained, for the friends of the Muses, a sacred and semi-divine being, for no other reason than that she had been Sidney's love, the subject of his verse. The opinion of contemporaries is perhaps worth as much as that of the critics of three hundred years later [*loc. cit.*].

Mr. Lee is speaking from the English point of view; M. Jusserand from the French. It is just barely possible—I will not emphasize the suggestion—that difference of nationality may to some degree account for their different way of taking, for instance, the so-called *locus classicus* of the celebration of Astrophel's pursuit of Stella, Spenser's elegy dedicated to Lady Essex, Sidney's

widow that was. But had they examined the elegy itself more closely, they would have found in it, I think, means of reconciliation.

To begin with, Spenser's dedication was distinctly less to the widow of the dead Sidney than to the wife of the living Essex. The elegy, whenever written, was published in 1595, when Spenser was assiduously courting the patronage of Essex, just victorious at Cadiz, and now reigning favorite. Assuredly, Spenser would have taken no chances of wounding Lady Essex's sensibilities; and despite M. Jusserand's citation of the indulgence shown to Chateaubriand's outspokenness "concerning his own extremely real loves," I doubt if an Englishwoman would have welcomed even in those more "spacious days" the frank celebration of her late husband's infidelity, and her rival's triumph. Be that as it may, the apparently unregarded thing is that Spenser implies no marital infidelity, raises no question of real rivalry. Here is the gist of his indictment:

Stella the faire, the fairest star in skie,
 As faire as Venus or the fairest faire,
 (A fairer star saw never living eie)
 Shot her sharp pointed beames through purest aire.
 Her he did love, her he alone did honor,
 His thoughts, his rimes, his songs were all upon her.

To her he vowd the service of his daies,
 On her he spent the riches of his wit;
 For her he made hymnes of immortall praise,
 Of onely her he sung, he thought, he writ. . . .

Ne her with ydle words alone he wowed,
 And verses vaine, (yet verses are not vaine)
 But with brave deeds to her sole service vowed,
 And bold achievements her did entertaîne.

Undoubtedly, Spenser says that Astrophel did love Stella—but *how?* was there not a manner of loving recognized at the time as capable of sincerity, even of fervency, and yet not in wedlock, and still not illicit? Of course, everyone at all familiar with the Renaissance will recognize that I mean platonic love. I have not time here to discuss in detail the revival of Platonism, sys-

tematized as a scientific gospel in the Florentine academy of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, and as a social gospel in the *Asolani* of Bembo and the *Cortegiano* of Castiglione, and during the following century divulgated throughout Europe. In the Renaissance and after, the social gospel of platonic love was often treated with levity or irony; but we cannot understand the Renaissance, unless we remember that many serious men and women took the notion seriously, almost religiously. Castiglione, in fact, speaking through Bembo, makes platonic love the virtual religious basis of his ideal character, the power *in* ourselves which makes for righteousness. Moreover, platonic love was for him, and for others like him, more than a vague term for an honest intimacy between men and women. It was a cult with rules and limitations, duties and rewards, as sharply defined as those of the mediaeval chivalric love-cult, from which indeed, fused with Platonism proper, the Renaissance platonic love-cult derived. Love is defined as desire awakened by beauty, and by progressive illumination passes from sensible beauty to spiritual, and from spiritual beauty to divine—from lust to love, and from love to religion. The duty of the lover is service and honor—*prouesse* and *courtoisie* adapted to the new social environment of the court; the reward of the right lover is intellectual communion with his lady by conversation (*entretiens du coeur*)—"risi piacevoli, i ragionamenti domestici e secreti, il motteggiare, scherzare, toccar la mano" (Castiglione)—and supreme spiritual communion in the kiss, the platonic sacrament; for the kiss, says Castiglione, "is rather union of soul than of body, since it has power to draw the soul to itself, and separate it from the body" ("il bacio si pò più presto dir congiungimento d'anima che di corpo, perchè in quella ha tanta forza che la tira a sè, e la separa dal corpo").

Now in the light of this quintessential doctrine, Spenser's account of Astrophel's "pursuit" of Stella becomes quite different from the vulgar *liaison* which shocks Mr. Lee, and is condoned by M. Jusserand "quia poeta multum amavit," *et bene dixit*. Spenser's opening figure, the likening of Stella's influence to "beames" "shot" from "fairest star in skie," recalls the most exquisite epitome of platonic love in Michelangelo's

Dalle più alte stelle
 Discende uno splendore
 Che'l desir tira a quelle;
 E qui si chiama amore.
 (From highest stars above
 Downward a radiance flows,
 Drawing desire to those;
 And here men call it love.)

The rest is the declaration of Sidney's "service" with "honor," in phrases virtually identical with Spenser's own explicit utterance of Platonism in his *Hymne to Love* (especially vss. 204-24). And in conformity with this interpretation of Spenser's elegy is the testimony of Matthew Roydon in the same series of elegies, that

Above all others this (Sidney) is hee
 Which erst approoved in his song,
 That love and honour might agree,
 And that pure love will do no wrong.

Spenser and Roydon, at least, read *Astrophel* and *Stella* as an expression ultimately of pure platonic love, and so acclaimed it. Such love was acceptedly licit toward a married woman; indeed, in theory, it was most fitly so directed; since the platonic, like the chivalric, love theorists held that their union of pure spirit was incompatible with the grosser union of matrimony, especially as for the noble class primarily concerned marriage was so largely a matter "of convenience." There was accordingly no theoretically valid reason for Lady Sidney to be jealous of *Stella*, or for Lord Rich to be jealous of *Astrophel*, though Sidney once or twice seems to imply that he was (cf. xxiv, xxxvii, lxxviii).

But Castiglione, more practical-minded than Bembo, made one prudent requirement for the platonic lover: he must be no longer young. Castiglione's ideal lovers were foreordained to be Michelangelo at sixty-three "loving" Vittoria Colonna at forty-eight. At the same time, Castiglione will pardon the young passionate lover, provided he will rise from the ashes of his dead passions to a higher love; and what Castiglione says on this point curiously fits Sidney's situation.

. . . . I believe that, although sensual love in every age of life is an evil (*malo*), yet in youths it is excusable, and even to some degree permis-

sible (*licito*); for though it entails sufferings, perils, fatigues, and many unhappinesses, still there are many who to win the favor of loved ladies do excellent deeds, which although not directed to a good end, are yet in themselves good; and so from much bitterness extract a little sweetness, and through the adversities they endure recognize at last their error. . . . I pardon them their base love [he goes on] provided that in it they show gentleness (*gentilezza*), courtesy, and valor . . . ; and when they are no longer of youthful age, they wholly abandon it, leaving that sensual desire, as the lowest rung of the ladder by which man climbs unto the true love.

At the beginning of the Sonnets, the young Sidney sees the better, yet cannot but follow the worse, love.

It is most true—that eyes are formed to serve
The inward light; and that the heavenly part
Ought to be King; from whose rules, who doth swerve,
(Rebels to Nature) strive for their own smart. . . .

True—that true beauty, virtue is indeed;
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,
Which elements with mortal mixture breed:
True—that on earth, we are but pilgrims made;
And should in soul, up to our country move:
True—and yet true that I must Stella love. —v.

And his love, he admits, is not only thus imperfect, being of a mortal beauty (though participant in the immortal "elements"), but also his love is stained with passion.

Alas! have I not pain enough? my friend!
Upon whose breast, a fiercer gripe doth tire,
Than did on him who first stole down the fire;
While Love on me, doth all his quiver spend:
But with your rhubarb words ye must contend
To grieve me worse in saying, "That Desire
Doth plunge my well-formed soul even in the mire
Of sinful thoughts, which do in ruin end."

In the following sestet he protests indeed a pure love—

If that be sin, which doth the manners frame
Well stayed with truth in word, and faith of deed;
Ready of wit, and fearing nought but shame:
If that be sin, which in fixt hearts doth breed
A loathing of all loose unchastity:
Then love is sin, and let me sinful be! —xiv.

This is love on the high platonic, as well as high human, level, in the spirit of Michelangelo's lines, or Donne's tribute to the Countess of Bedford—

Madam,
You have refined me, and to worthiest things.

But as often Sidney's mood is the rebellious appeal—

O give my passions leave to run their race!

The influence of Stella, of the "Star," is that of the radiant stars which Michelangelo describes. In sonnets lxi, lxii, she makes her own "sweet breathed defence"—

That who indeed infelt affection bears,
So captives to his saint both soul and sense;
That wholly hers, all selfness he forbears:
Thence his desires he learns, his life's course thence.

The term "saint" was peculiarly affected by the adherents of the "new religion in love," as Suckling was later to dub Platonism. This sublimated love Stella will reciprocate—

Late tired with woe, even ready for to pine
With rage of love, I called my love "unkind!"
She in whose eyes love, though unfelt, doth shine
Sweetly said, "That I, true love in her should find."

I joyed; but straight thus watered was my wine.
"That love she did, but loved a love not blind;
Which would not let me, whom she loved, decline
From nobler course, fit for my birth and mind:

And therefore by her love's authority,
Willed me, these tempests of vain love to fly;
And anchor fast myself on Virtue's shore."

—lxii.

For awhile he is still rebellious.

No more! my Dear! no more these counsels try!
O give my passions leave to run their race!
Let Fortune lay on me her worst disgrace!
Let folk o'ercharged with brain, against me cry!
Let clouds bedim my face, break in mine eye!
Let me no steps but of lost labour trace!
Let all the earth in scorn recount my case;
But do not will me from my love to fly!

—lxxiv.

Then, of a sudden, he ecstatically rejoices in her conditional love—

For Stella hath with words (where faith doth shine),

Of her high heart given me the monarchy:

I! I! O I may say that she is mine.

And though she give but thus conditionally

This realm of bliss, "while virtuous course I take:"

No kings be crowned, but they some covenant make. —lxix.

He recognizes in her the true *platonique*—

. . . not content to be perfection's heir,

Thyself doth strive all minds that way to move;

Who mark in thee, what is in thee most fair:

So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,

As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.¹ —lxxi.

"Quiet she"—like the *primum mobile*, drawing all by divine grace-giving grace; "he, passion-rent" still, but ever more subdued to

Service and Honour, Wonder with Delight,

Fear to offend, Will worthy to appear,

Care shining in mine eyes, Faith in my sprite:

These things are left me by my only Dear. —lxxii.

And as reward for their observance, the sacramental kiss is bestowed—

. . . Kiss! which souls, even souls together ties

By links of love. . . . —lxxxi.

In this realization of Castiglione's like-justified reward is the climax of the sonnet-drama, at least as posthumously published. The rest is complaint for misunderstandings, absence, sickness, and the ever outbreking of the lover's lower self; until at last he despairs. But the sequence is manifestly on Petrarchan lines, and Petrarch ends in reconciliation with self, and with God; so we may well regard two other famous sonnets by Sidney as intended for the epilogue to his sonnet-drama.² In the first,

¹ The function of the "society" *platonique* of the period was twofold: (1) to influence through intimate relations a particular servant; (2) to diffuse her influence more formally through a coterie of "servants." (Cf. J. B. Fletcher, "Précieuses at the Court of Charles I, *Jl. of Comp. Lit.*, Vol. I (1903), p. 120.) Lady Rich fulfilled both functions: besides having her "*chevalier intime*," Sidney, she received poetic incense from a coterie of Elizabethan writers. R. Barnfield dedicated to her his "Affectionate Shepherd" (1594), as a "meane offering" to her "Iuorie Shrine;" Bartholomew Yong dedicated to her his translations, both of Montemayor's *Diana* and of Guazzo's *Civile Conversazione*, Book IV; John Davies of Hereford and Henry Constable addressed sonnets to her.

² Cf. also Lee, *op. cit.*, p. xlvi.

apostrophizing Desire, he protests to have at last overcome its baleful power; in the second, he rises above even purified love of mortal beauty to the love of the divine "elements" themselves of beauty, in God. The two sonnets at once round up the dramatic sequence by the triumph of Stella, the star of love, seen first as Woman, then as God, and epitomize the platonic principle of evolution at its highest. I therefore venture to quote them, familiar as they are.

Thou blind man's mark! thou fool's self-chosen snare!
Fond fancy's scum! and dregs of scattered thought!
Band of all evils! cradle of causeless care!
Thou web of will! whose end is never wrought.

Desire! Desire! I have too dearly bought,
With price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware!
Too long! too long asleep thou hast me brought!
Who should my mind to higher things prepare;

But yet in vain, thou hast my ruin sought!
In vain, thou mad'st me to vain things aspire!
In vain, thou kindlest all thy smoky fire!
For virtue hath this better lesson taught.

Within myself, to seek my only hire:
Desiring nought, but how to kill Desire.

Leave me, O love! which reachest but to dust!
And thou, my mind! aspire to higher things!
Grow rich in that, which never taketh rust!
Whatever fades, but fading pleasure brings.

Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might
To that sweet yoke, where lasting freedoms be!
Which breaks the clouds, and opens forth the light
That doth both shine, and give us sight to see.

O take fast hold! Let that light be thy guide!
In this small course which birth draws out to death:
And think how evil becometh him to slide,
Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath!

Then farewell, world! Thy uttermost I see!
Eternal Love, maintain Thy love in me!

It may be conceded that, as Mr. Lee insists, both of these sonnets have an "imitative quality." Of the joint theme of both, one prototype among many is thus translated by George Santayana from Lorenzo de' Medici—

As a lamp, burning through the waning night,
 When the oil begins to fail that fed its fire
 Flares up, and in its dying waxes bright
 And mounts and spreads the better to expire;

So in this pilgrimage and earthly flight
 The ancient hope is spent that fed desire,
 And if there burn within a greater light
 'Tis that the vigil's end approacheth nigher.

Hence thy last insult, Fortune, cannot move,
 Nor death's inverted torches give alarm;
 I see the end of wrath and bitter moan.

My fair Medusa into sculptured stone
 Turns me no more, my Siren cannot charm.
 Heaven draws me up to its supernal love.¹

Mr. Santayana speaks of thought here rising "to the purest sphere of tragedy and of religion." Assuredly, the same comment may be passed upon Sidney's "thought." Neither as mere clever *jeux d'esprit* of an Italianate *virtuoso*, nor as the *chronique scandaleuse*, moving but shameless, of an Elizabethan Chateaubriand, were the sonnets of Astrophel to Stella felt by Sidney's contemporaries; but as rising "to the purest sphere of tragedy and of religion." The silliness of Renaissance platonic love as a fad and fancy of cynical beaux and brainless coquettes was as patent to our ancestors as to ourselves: many before John Cleveland similarly counselled such "Platonicks"—

For shame, thou everlasting wooer. . . .
 For shame, you pretty female elves,
 Cease thus to candy up yourselves!

But Castiglione's serenely dignified gentleman was no candified fop; if anything, he might prove a little over-serious, a little of a "mollycoddle," in these days. The sixteenth century produced two notable incarnations of him in his religious love—the old Michelangelo and the young Sidney. Both—but one in beautiful, sad serenity, the other after struggle and fever—are able at last to say to the lady of their ideal:

Beata l'alma ove non corre tempo
 Per te s' è fatta a contemplare Dio.
 (Blessed the soul where runs no longer time
 By thee empowered to contemplate God.)

¹ *Poetry and Religion*, New York, 1900, p. 135.

If Penelope Devereux could so “empower” at the last Sidney, we can well understand with M. Jusserand how she, “in spite of her faults, more and more visible, in spite of her far from exemplary life, remained, for the friends of the Muses, a sacred and semi-divine being, for no other reason than that she had been Sidney’s love.” Only, this “love” we must understand as Sidney’s contemporaries understood it, and *not* according to “the critics of three hundred years later.” And furthermore, if we are to take Sidney at his word at all, we should assuredly take him at his own word, and not according to our opinion of what a twentieth-century man would have done or said in his place. It is grossly unhistorical to dismiss an ideal as silly or prurient three centuries ago, because it became so later. Of course, Sidney may be lying to conceal an adulterous adventure, or—to speak more euphemistically—feigning. There is no disputing about the *possibility* of a fact; and—to repeat another truism—while there is imagination, there is doubt. But at least the burden of proof is on the doubter; and he will, I surmise, find it a hard task to rebut the actual evidence in Sidney’s character, notably serious and chivalrous—“the president of nobleness and chevalree”¹—capable of fanatic devotion to an idea, in the contemporary conception of him as the “right courtier” of Castiglione’s stamp, and in the contemporary unambiguous exaltation of his love for “Stella” as of the “new religion in love.”

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¹Spenser, *Shep. Cal. Proemium*